
Have Evangelicals Lost Their Way?

We live in an age of change. Evangelicalism, as much as anything else, is going through transformation, but are the changes for better or worse? For some, Evangelicalism is maturing and evolving into a responsible contribution to Christianity. Others see the changes as a sell-out of principles, and a denial of the faith of our fathers. Whither Evangelicalism?

The Evangelical Heritage

Biblical Christianity has waxed and waned down through the centuries. Rarely has it had such numerical strength and public support as in the latter part of the twentieth century. Evangelicals are an accepted part of the ecclesiastical scenery, with large Evangelical publishing houses, denominational leaders who openly profess to be Evangelicals, and an ever-growing acceptance of Evangelical scholarship. Around Australia, faithful Evangelical ministries are being conducted in many churches and Evangelical Bible colleges and theological colleges are filled with students.

Now, at the time of its great strength, Evangelicalism is losing its nerve.

Evangelicals have always been on the leading edge of innovation. The Evangelical concern to reach the world with the gospel has prompted Evangelicals in the past to take daring initiatives. Many institutions of our church scene today have stemmed from Evangelicalism: the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A., the great missionary societies, the non-denominational outreach societies (such as Scripture Union, the Bible Society, Inter-Varsity Fellowship), the denominations of the Reformation period and the Evangelical awakening, field preaching in other people's

parishes (a la Wesley and Whitfield), and Scripture memorising (from the Lollards to the Navigators)—Evangelicals have always been innovative.

Partly because of this innovative tendency, and partly because of the exclusive claim of Biblical Christianity, Evangelicals have always been challenging the established church. There has always been an uneasy tension between the theological purity of Evangelicalism and the ecclesiastical pragmatism of large denominations and associations.

However, the day for cursorily dismissing Evangelicals is past. In terms of church growth, Evangelicals have become a force to reckon with. In terms of theological scholarship, Evangelicalism has consistently held its own. In terms of church politics, Evangelicalism seems to have made large gains. And most importantly of all in terms of grass roots church ministry, Evangelicalism is spread everywhere.

Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

Just as a political party that has been in opposition too long finds it hard to govern, so Evangelicalism has been bewildered by its success. It's one thing to criticise and oppose those who are making the running; it's quite another to set the pace and persuade people to follow. Now, at the time of its great

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strength, Evangelicalism is losing its nerve.

No longer is there a biting, cutting edge of doctrinal distinctiveness challenging the wider church. No longer is Evangelicalism reaching out to the world with new and innovative approaches to the ministry of the gospel. Now its organisations and structures seem tired, outmoded and worn out.

...the reality of our minority position has not entered our consciousness.

The voluntary societies have a decidedly nineteenth century look about them and the personnel that serve them tend to be the same names in every society. We seem to spend more time quarrelling and disagreeing amongst ourselves and trying to maintain our fringe members than in getting on with the task at hand. And the agenda of discussion and debate in the world, in our denominations and even amongst Evangelicals, seems to be established by non-Evangelicals.

Evangelicalism and the World

Within our Australian society, the Christian world view has radically deteriorated. The media and politicians are ignoring the Christian constituency. On one issue after another our politicians have moved away from Christian perceptions: alcohol, pornography, homosexuality, abortion—the list goes on. To add to this, we have never come to terms with the social shifts of our day—the widespread use of television and motor car, the commercialization of relationships, the growth of the cashless society and the move from a 'British' culture to multi-culturalism. Our evangelistic campaigns bring smaller and smaller returns. We feel marginalised in a world that seems to be leaving us behind.

Each Sunday, the churchless nature of our community is graphically illustrated.

We may not be a secular society (in that we are not a society of atheists nor are we unaffected by our religious traditions) but we are increasingly a churchless society. What is more, the reality of our minority position has not entered our consciousness. On any given Sunday in the diocese of Sydney about 35,000 adults out of a population of some 3.5 million attend Anglican churches. Almost one million Sydney-siders call themselves Anglicans, but still only 3.5% of these attend church. This figure is much the same all over Australia and across the denominations. Grim news indeed.

The Place of Evangelicalism in the Church

However, even more significant is the shifting place of Evangelicalism within Christianity. Having finally achieved a toe-hold of acceptability, Evangelicalism is paying the price of respectability. Amidst the constant shifts and realignments of theological positions and the struggle for ecclesiastical power, Evangelicalism has won the battle but lost the day.

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As in the past, Evangelicalism continues to battle with Liberalism, Mysticism, and Ecclesiasticism. These keep emerging in different guises, but their goal is the same—to turn us away from Evangelicalism. Today, they all turn up as "Evangelicals" for the most dangerous wolves always appear in the finest merino. No longer are they on the outside spurning, taunting and denouncing us. Now they have found their way inside the camp and are calling us to move on from our theological roots. ▷

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We have Liberalism masquerading as an Evangelical concern for the Word of God. Calling upon us to undertake a 'new hermeneutic' which will make the Bible relevant and contemporary, they succeed only in denying the sufficiency of Scripture and selling out Evangelical faith to the whims and fashions of modern thought. No longer is Evangelicalism declaring the revealed truth;

now it prefers to canvass many points of view. Evangelical bookshops are no longer full of Evangelical books that propagate the faith "delivered once for all to the saints". Instead, we are bombarded by a hundred different viewpoints, for we are told that Evangelicalism is committed to the consideration of every view point and the propagation of truth wherever it may be found.

And with this broad easy-going approach comes the Ecclesiasticism of the modern Evangelical. Evangelicals are now discouraged from claiming to be a true representation of the gospel, and instead are taught to speak of their tradition as being one of many within the full orb of Christian experience. Our politeness has given birth to tolerance, and our tolerance, now fully grown, has spawned relativism. In this new age of ecumenical endeavour, we have learnt to deal in the double-talk of theological ambiguity, by which we can have fellowship with the anti-Christ, should he wear the right dress.

As we grow in ecclesiastical complexity we pay the price of an ever-increasing bureaucratic control insisting upon denominational rules and regulations. Complex liturgies and outmoded church practices are defended fiercely. The Evangelical innovativeness, by which we can reach the world

with the gospel of salvation, is nipped in the bud.

As if all this were not enough, we also see emerging a new "Evangelical Mysticism". No longer are the mystics locked away in mediaeval monasteries practising the patterns of Catholicism (be it Anglo- or Roman) and following their spiritual directors, Jesuit heroes, miracles and superstitions. Now we

are taught that mysticism is part of the Evangelical tradition! When it was clothed in medieval Catholic garb, our forefathers recognised it for what it was, but now that it

is called "spirituality" and comes with the full weight of Evangelical credulity, it is sad to see the inroads it is making. In supposedly evangelical books and magazines we are encouraged to go inwards (not heavenwards), to chant 'Jesus' as our mantra, even to set up oratories. The longing for this super-spiritual, tangibly supernatural, exotically magical gospel has opened up new roads of ecumenical relationships and ecclesiastical alignment through the Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal movements and the Signs and Wonders ministries.

These varying movements have played upon our weaknesses, our desire for academic respectability, our struggle with prayerlessness, our weakness in the eyes of the world, our powerlessness in the face of the sufferings of this age, our longing for ecclesiastical acceptance and respectability, our dissatisfaction with the sufficiency of Scripture. Evangelicalism has no-one to blame but itself.

What can we do?

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Three responses

Conservative reactionaries

Perhaps the most common response today is that of the conservative reactionaries.

The conservative reactionaries constantly hark back to the golden age of their youth. They oppose change and seek merely to repeat the performance of yester-year. In so doing, they calcify the gospel ministry in the culture of another day and another age, and assure us of an ever-diminishing future. They are like batsmen with their back foot cemented behind the crease as they play spin bowling—their innings will be boring and their demise is certain.

Evangelicals tend to be conservative theologically, and therefore are easily prone to this syndrome.

Trendy reactionaries

Almost as common and equally inadequate is the response of the trendy reactionaries.

Their response is to follow the latest trends and fashions of the society around us. This is still not action based upon our own theological foundation—it is simply mimicking the competition (and always staying one step behind). Gradually we are sucked into theological compromise as we accept other people's patterns of ministry.

Because we are trendy we do not realise that we are reactionary. We think that only the conservatives are reactionary. But when non-Evangelicals are setting the agenda, then we are not acting—we are reacting.

'Actionaries'

This is the path forward—to act, not react.

We have to dig back into the truths of the gospel and gain fresh confidence in our Evangelical theology. It is only as we are convinced by the truth of God's word and explore and re-discover its implications, that we will be able to propagate Evangelical truth in our world.

A renewed confidence in the Evangelical position will equip us to adopt genuinely Evangelical methods. We will be able to discard the cultural baggage that was not essentially Evangelical. And we will discover new cultural baggage necessary to communicate with our society and not inconsistent with the message we proclaim.

The Cost Of Going Forward

Taking action is a costly business. It's hard work to keep going back to our theological roots. It's hard work thinking out initiatives. When we try something new we will be criticised. When we fail we will be laughed at. When we succeed we will be envied and ridiculed, for Australians hate tall poppies.

Taking initiative puts us in conflict with conservative reactionaries, and taking Evangelical initiatives puts us in conflict with trendy reactionaries. Being consistently Evangelical puts us in conflict with Mystics, Liberals and Ecclesiastics, whether they wear the brand name 'Evangelical' or not.

Let us not be distracted by minor issues as we organise for action; but let us so understand the theology of Scripture that we will continually promote the heart of the gospel.

